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## Performing Place, Heritage and *Henry V* in Portsmouth Historic Dockyard

**Abstract:** This article focuses on a reading of an amateur Royal Navy Theatre Association (RNTA) production: Collingwood RSC's open-air *Henry V*, which took place alongside the iconic HMS Victory housed in Portsmouth Historic Dockyard. The production emerged as part of the Royal Shakespeare Company's Open Stages initiative and this article considers how the RNTA, and this production, became implicated in systems of cultural value implicit not only in Open Stages, but more specifically in the heritage re-development of Portsmouth Historic Dockyard. It argues that this site's promotion of maritime history, naval heritage and cultural tourism can be understood in relation to Laurajane Smith's understanding of authorised heritage discourse and heritage as a cultural performance engaged in the construction of cultural identity, memory and place. After situating Portsmouth Historic Dockyard as a performative environment that stages narratives of nationhood and empire, it considers how Collingwood RSC's *Henry V* engaged with and became explicitly dominated by these narratives. The article proposes that the insertion of the *real* in the form of the theatricalized heritage setting, serving navy personnel and the acting out of naval traditions provokes questions about how the blurring of the dramatic and the real, the past and present had a profound impact on the affective economies and ideological ramifications of the production.

**Keywords:** heritage, *Henry V*, Portsmouth, Royal Navy, Shakespeare, performance.

### Introduction

Raphael Samuel is right when he proposes that 'lexically "heritage" is a term capacious enough to accommodate wildly discrepant meanings'.<sup>1</sup> In the British context the term is often prefixed by numerous categorising words such as social, living, local, cultural, rural, national and industrial, as a means of capturing some degree of specificity and the impetus to preserve and disseminate heritage in its myriad forms. There are also many different ways of understanding the operation of heritage. In *Uses of Heritage* (2006) Laurajane Smith makes a distinction between what she refers to as 'authorised heritage discourse', which emphasises the materiality of heritage as site, object, 'thing' and the idea of heritage as process.<sup>2</sup> In her re-theorising

of heritage as a cultural process activated in the moment of encounter, Smith stresses that heritage is a 'performance that is engaged with the construction and reconstruction of cultural identity, memory, sense of place and belonging'.<sup>3</sup> It is also a vehicle through which 'certain cultural and social meanings and values are identified, reaffirmed or rejected'.<sup>4</sup>

In the discussion that follows I consider how Portsmouth Historic Dockyard functions in relation to Smith's understanding of heritage and Alice Mah's notion of legacy in terms of its promotion of maritime history, naval heritage and cultural tourism.<sup>5</sup> In particular, I focus on a reading of a Royal Navy Theatre Association (RNTA) amateur production: Collingwood RSC's open-air *Henry V*, which was staged alongside the iconic HMS Victory in Portsmouth Historic Dockyard from 17-20 July 2013 as part of the Royal Shakespeare Company's Open Stages initiative. The article considers how the RNTA, and this production, became embroiled in various manifestations of the nation's heritage industry and implicated in systems of cultural value implicit not only in Open Stages, but those that inevitably come to the fore in the re-developed Portsmouth Historic Dockyard. Hence, after situating Portsmouth Historic Dockyard as a performative environment that stages narratives of place, nationhood and empire, it considers how Collingwood RSC's production of *Henry V* engaged with and became explicitly dominated by these narratives. The article proposes that the insertion of the *real* in the form of the theatricalized heritage setting, serving navy personnel and the acting out of naval traditions provokes questions about how the blurring of the dramatic and the real, the past and present had a profound impact on the affective economies and ideological ramifications of the production.

### **The Royal Shakespeare Company, Open Stages and the Royal Navy**

The Royal Navy has a long tradition of amateur performance that encompasses on-board theatricals and performance rituals such as the Ship's Own Dramatic Society (or SODS) Operas and crossing the line ceremonies, as well as theatre companies located on naval bases that are organised under the umbrella of the RNTA. In the city of Portsmouth, there are three

companies located at different naval bases: The Admirals' Players, The Sultan Theatre Group and Collingwood RSC.<sup>6</sup> These groups variously comprise serving military personnel, Ministry of Defence staff, their family and members of the local community who come together traditionally to do an annual pantomime and a spring show, which forms part of the RNTA Festival that takes place annually. So, an open-air production of *Henry V*, directed by an ex-member of the Navy, Chris Blatch-Gainey, and produced by Stephen Johns, HMS Collingwood's armourer and one of the Royal Navy's Field Gun Maintainers, was something out of the ordinary.

The production arose after the RNTA, representing all the Portsmouth-based groups, applied to be involved in the Royal Shakespeare Company's Open Stages initiative, which was launched in 2011. On the surface, Open Stages was designed as a large-scale democratization of Shakespeare. As Ian Wainwright, producer for Open Stages, put it:

The RSC's Open Stages project demonstrates & develops the idea that Shakespeare is & always has been, the people's playwright, by engaging with, supporting, developing and celebrating the work of amateur theatre makers.<sup>7</sup>

However, there are clearly issues of cultural value that come into play when considering the agenda and outcome of Open Stages. By the RSC's own admission, 'amateur theatre has developed as a robust, self-reliant, popular theatre scene unmoved by the politics and fleeting fashions of subsidised funding'.<sup>8</sup> In other words it has, by and large, existed outside of the realms of professional commodity culture as a self-generated, self-funded and self-regulated sector free to choose its repertoire, to work with the skills set of its participants and to produce work that engages with its immediate locality and audience-base. Nonetheless, the lure of the RSC proved incredibly seductive and in its first year Open Stages encouraged over two hundred and fifty amateur theatre groups to 'produce their own RSC branded Shakespeare-themed productions'.<sup>9</sup> The RNTA, like many others, welcomed the increased visibility and cultural legitimacy bestowed by an endorsement from the

professional sector and, especially, association with the cultural capital of the RSC. The RNTA hoped the RSC link would help widen their audience base, improve ticket sales and provide helpful ammunition when making the case for continued resourcing from the Navy at a time of financial constraint. As Blatch-Gainey put it during an interview, 'You put that logo in the corner of your poster that means something...it's such a big boost'.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Collingwood RSC had already playfully associated itself with the cultural cache of the RSC through its name, which actually stands for the rather meaningless Random Salad Company.

However, it would be too easy to read Open Stages as a one-way act of cultural benevolence towards amateur groups; instead, there is an alternative reading that reverses the traditional amateur/professional hierarchy and asserts the cultural capital of the amateur. There is a very telling line in the RSC's Final Progress Report for Open Stages 2011-12 that states: 'As so many people's first encounter with Shakespeare is through seeing or performing in amateur theatre, it became obvious to us that it is in the theatre sector's best interest that these productions are of the highest quality possible'.<sup>11</sup> So, the RSC *needs* the amateur as part of sustaining and renewing the Shakespeare industry, but it needs it to perform in particular ways so that potential audiences are not put off by the 'shoddy' performance values generally associated with amateur production. Hence, the Open Stages narrative has stressed the need to 'inspire risk taking and raise aspiration' through the provision of skills development workshops, mentoring and professional feedback.<sup>12</sup> Input that Wainwright described as a means of 'ensuring that each Open Stages production contained some genuine RSC "DNA"', a metaphor suggestive of genetic manipulation that raises important questions around cultural authority, value and capital.<sup>13</sup>

In an era when the cult of the amateur is very much in evidence, Open Stages also enabled the RSC to key into this zeitgeist in a way that captured the public's imagination and prompted significant publicity:

Open Stages generated over 100 articles in local newspapers, 3 features in the Observer and Observer Magazine, 2 in the Guardian, 4 in the Scotsman as well as articles in the Sunday Times, Evening Standard, Irish News, Polish News, Daily Mail and Sun. As well as coverage on numerous local radio stations Open Stages was featured on Radio 4's Today Programme and even formed the basis of 'Thought for The Day'.<sup>14</sup>

There is something compelling about military personnel performing and those marketing Open Stages soon latched on to the powerful combined axis of RSC and Royal Navy branding, which are both powerfully suggestive of an authoritative, official version of British culture and identity. The RNTA's first Open Stages production in 2012, *Much Ado About Nothing*, which the director Lieutenant Commander Philippa Sargent staged in modern dress with Don Pedro and his men as Royal Marines returning from Afghanistan, featured heavily in publicity for Open Stages.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the 2013 and 2014 RNTA productions of *Henry V* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* were both selected for the RSC's summer programme of amateur and semi-professional productions that take place in the open-air arena of The Dell in Stratford-upon-Avon. As such, we can see how the RNTA has been called upon to contribute to sustaining the Shakespeare industry as a vital component of Britain's cultural heritage. In addition, participation in Open Stages also paved the way for the RNTA's amateur theatre practice to be implicated in the heritage agenda at the heart of Portsmouth Historic Dockyard's redevelopment.

### **Portsmouth: Maritime History, Naval Heritage and Regeneration**

Collingwood RSC's approach to *Henry V* resituated the context of Shakespeare's play to 1805, with sailors pulling into port on HMS Victory to prepare for action against the French at Cape Trafalgar. Hence, the interpretive strategies employed in this production were specifically alert to the particularities of its staging in the regenerated Portsmouth Historic Dockyard. Like other port cities across the world, Portsmouth has had to reimagine and

reinvent itself in response to post-industrial decline, globalization and the changing face of military engagement. Mah explains in *Port Cities and Global Legacies* (2014) that in the face of increasing competition from the Asian market,

Within Western urban regeneration policies since the 1980s and 1990s, cities have been encouraged by business elites and governments to become 'competitive cities', 'creative cities', or 'entrepreneurial cities', through using place-marketing and tourism-led regeneration to promote economic transformation.<sup>16</sup>

Like many other port city and waterfront developments such as Belfast's Titanic Quarter and the Albert Dock and Kings Waterfront in Liverpool, over the past fifteen years Portsmouth's establishment of a new competitive identity has been rooted in tourism, consumption, leisure and heritage-led redevelopment. Portsmouth's waterfront now includes Gunwharf Quays, a leisure and retail centre opened in 2001 on the site of the old Royal Navy arsenal and the 170-metre landmark Spinnaker Tower opened in 2005. According to Mah, port city developments work by:

(1) reconnecting the public to the waterfront, and (2) re-establishing 'great' port city status. These narratives are closely intertwined because the notion of 'greatness' is one of the key ways that the 'public' – conceived in rather partial ways – is being reconnected to the waterfront.<sup>17</sup>

Gunwharf Quays and Spinnaker Tower have served to physically reconnect the public to Portsmouth's waterfront, but re-establishing 'greatness' is a more amorphous task. In this instance, it has meant trading on narratives of Portsmouth's 'great' maritime history, world-leading ship-building and prolific naval heritage that is now preserved and staged in the heart of Portsmouth Dockyard.

Providing strong evidence for Robert Hewison's observation that in a climate of decline, rather than manufacturing goods, the British have been the front-runners in manufacturing, re-staging and selling heritage as spectacle; over

the past decade Portsmouth Dockyard has morphed from an industrial complex rooted in labour to become Portsmouth Historic Dockyard.<sup>18</sup> However, rather than adopting the popular pastime of 'heritage baiting', so eloquently critiqued in Raphael Samuel's *Theatres of Memory* (1994), which entails the persistent linking of heritage with pejorative associations such as decline, disneyfication and passive consumption, we might adopt Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's idea that heritage has facilitated a 'second life'.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, re-categorising and re-branding the dockyard as 'historic' and trading in heritage has been a strategic part of the regeneration of the port city, a way of designating and heightening its significance as a culturally and economically viable tourist attraction in the south of England.

Portsmouth Historic Dockyard is home to HMS Victory, a ship launched in 1765 which, as well as being Nelson's flagship and a living museum to the Georgian Navy, remains the world's oldest naval ship still officially in commission. It encompasses HMS Warrior, Britain's first iron-hulled armoured warship launched in 1860, which was central to Queen Victoria's fleet maintaining Britain's naval superiority to sustain the empire. The National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN) is located in the old naval storehouses, which contains four exhibition galleries dedicated to preserving and showcasing the Royal Navy's diverse military, social and cultural history. And, most recently, the Dockyard witnessed the 2013 opening of a new centrepiece, the boat-shaped Mary Rose Museum, which houses Henry VIII's flagship, the only sixteenth century warship on display anywhere in the world, alongside a vast collection of Tudor artefacts.

Much of this redevelopment has been supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), which has invested over £58 million in the local area, with 76% targeted at naval and maritime heritage projects.<sup>20</sup> The HLF works from an understanding of heritage as a vehicle that 'provides the roots of our identities and enriches the quality of our lives. It inspires pride in communities and is at the heart of today's tourism industry'.<sup>21</sup> With this definition driving its agenda, the HLF has supported conservation work on HMS Warrior and HMS Victory, the creation of the Mary Rose Museum, the establishment of two new exhibition spaces at the NMRN and is currently investing in the



redevelopment of Boathouse 4 to preserve and showcase traditional boatbuilding skills. By anybody's standards the redevelopment project of Portsmouth Historic Dockyard has been a great success. The public appetite for naval history and heritage is evidenced by strong visitor numbers, which rose significantly from 385,000 in 2012 to 718,000 in 2013 following the opening of the new Mary Rose Museum.<sup>22</sup> In addition, there is strong local identification and support. Portsmouth is featured as one of twelve case studies in a recent HLF survey commissioned to mark twenty years of National Lottery investment in the UK's heritage, which found that '81% of people in Portsmouth feel pride in where they live because of the city's heritage'.<sup>23</sup>

Clearly, then, Portsmouth and Portsmouth Historic Dockyard is steeped in 'authorised heritage discourse', the material vestiges of its maritime history and naval heritage, but what is significant, as Smith argues, is how this materiality is deployed in a process of remembering, prioritising and 're/constructing cultural and social values and meanings'.<sup>24</sup> Here, I would argue, the materiality evokes collective memories of local and national identity: Portsmouth/Great Britain's once globally superior fleet, extraordinary military power, legacy of conquest and the associated histories of empire and colonialism. This emphasis is not unusual, as David Lowenthal has recognised, predominately, 'Heritage in Britain is said to reflect nostalgia for imperial self-esteem'.<sup>25</sup> As such, the site works similarly to the ambivalence Mah notes regarding the ports of Marseilles, Liverpool and New Orleans, which 'is complicated by the historical entanglement of imperial and economic decline, and by the tourism-led and culture-led urban renewal projects that tend to emphasize positive rather than negative global maritime legacies'.<sup>26</sup>

The potential for ambivalence is apparent when considering HMS Victory, which played an integral role in Collingwood RSC's *Henry V*. Its preservation and on-going conservation is reliant on its explicit connection to two key national signifiers. In the first instance, there is its association with the Battle of Trafalgar and the suppression of Napoleon Bonaparte's plans to invade Britain, which secured Britain's naval supremacy and control of a stretch of water at the heart of her global military and trading power as an empire. It is

also a shrine to Admiral Nelson, one of Britain's most celebrated military leaders and national heroes, who was shot and died on the Orlop Deck during the battle. Therefore, the continuing efforts to preserve HMS Victory can undoubtedly be read in relation to Mah's narratives of 'greatness', but also her understanding of the political implications of legacy.

Legacies speak of inheritance and persistence, of what remains through processes of change. They are rooted not only in processes of ruination and decline, but also in processes of resistance and recovery. Legacies denote a sense of continuity amidst disruption and change.<sup>27</sup>

As HMS Victory ably demonstrates, through the preservation and performance of Portsmouth Historic Dockyard's naval heritage, the legacy of empire, colonial rule, national unity and defence of the nation against a foreign threat persist despite Britain's diminished role as a world power in the post-imperial age. Equally, this staging of heritage enables a counter-narrative of success to persist despite the narratives of decline and ruination evident in the context of de-industrialisation and neoliberalism, which most recently saw BAE Systems announce the loss of 940 shipbuilding jobs in Portsmouth Dockyard during 2013.<sup>28</sup> Let me be clear that I am not trying to demean the significant role this heritage tourism plays in conserving, celebrating and educating people about Britain's important naval history, but I am keen to think through the ideological ramifications that arise when encountering this heritage, not least because as Rodney Harrison articulates, 'heritage is primarily *not* about the past, but instead about our relationship with the *present and future*'.<sup>29</sup>

I will turn now to Collingwood RSC's *Henry V* to explore how this production, aided by the rich density of signs available within the visual and aural field of performance, contributed to the narratives of exceptionalism and 'greatness' Portsmouth was trying to establish through its dockyard redevelopment. For instance, the production exploited the Navy's access to this unique heritage environment, which facilitated an interpretation that explicitly channelled the legacy of Nelson, via Henry V, through the deployment of his iconic flagship. But also, significantly, drew on the powerful resonance of real serving naval

personnel, both within the performance and the *mise en scène*. I argue that this blurred relationship between the fictional and the real created a multi-layered theatrical event that worked to showcase not only the performed heritage in its midst, but to underscore the value systems inherent within the environment. As Smith asserts,

Cultural heritage management and the acts of visiting heritage sites as a tourist or other visitor become acts directly implicated in the occasional construction or reconstruction, but most certainly the maintenance, or more precisely *conservation* and *preservation*, of social and cultural meanings.<sup>30</sup>

### **Evoking Nelson, the Nation and National Heritage**

Anthony Jackson and Jenny Kidd observe in *Performing Heritage* (2011) that ‘visits to...heritage sites have in recent years become (not least in promotional rhetoric) less about the *object* and more about the *experience*: an “encounter” with a past that is “brought to life”, peppered with “events”’.<sup>31</sup> Their assessment chiming with the assertion of English Heritage that: ‘People are increasingly looking for experiences that bring history to life in an engaging way’ and Harrison’s understanding of the ‘contemporary experience economy’.<sup>32</sup> Collingwood RSC’s *Henry V* can be usefully read in these terms as a means of inviting, framing and activating a particular performative encounter with a heritage site. It was an event that could contribute to a felt, emotional attachment to the site’s materiality and implicitly the cultural and social meanings that materiality evokes. Indeed, Tim Benton argues that this type of affective appeal is crucial in determining how a nation’s heritage is selected and supported by organisations such as HLF and English Heritage.<sup>33</sup>

It was a complicated logistical operation to have Collingwood RSC performing in the Victory Arena as it required the agreement and cooperation of several agencies including the Navy, the Portsmouth Royal Dockyard Historical Trust, HMS Victory, the NMRN and Flagship, which runs events in the dockyard, but as Johns put it, the dockyard saw the production as an effective public

relations exercise that helped 'put them on the map'.<sup>34</sup> The drive to privilege an encounter with heritage was certainly evident in the promotional rhetoric for the production that appeared on the Portsmouth Historic Dockyard tourist attractions website:

Imagine being part of the crew of HMS Victory before sailing to Cape Trafalgar in 1805, pulling into Port, just for a while, to give the crew and the local inhabitants a taste of what it is to fight and feel pride for the British cause. In this time of war with the French and Spanish they mean to raise the blood and morale by putting on the famous Shakespearean play "Henry V", where the British facing incredible odds see victory against a superior force.<sup>35</sup>

However, as this demonstrates, the encounter with heritage the publicity invites has ideological implications as the audience is called upon to become invested in a patriotic impulse that draws on the cultural register of Shakespeare, the Battle of Trafalgar and the notion of British heroism or pluck triumphing over the military superiority of a foreign other.

In selecting *Henry V* as the RNTA's entry for Open Stages 2013, Blatch-Gainey knew that the real Henry V is a pivotal figure for the Navy and Portsmouth. He is largely credited with reviving the Navy's fortunes after investing in considerable expansion of the naval fleet over a five-year period from 1413 and 1418, which ultimately secured control of the contested, valuable and territorially significant English Channel. However, in arriving at his approach to the play, Blatch-Gainey explained that 'HMS Victory herself gave me the inspiration'.<sup>36</sup> Nelson embarked from Portsmouth in 1805 to command the fleet that would defeat the Franco-Spanish enemy at Trafalgar and evidence suggests that at least some of Henry V's naval fleet must also have left Portsmouth for France prior to the battle of Agincourt. Broader comparisons between Henry V and Nelson are also credible. They were both popular charismatic leaders, praised for their brilliant military strategy, patriotism, heroism and, according to Blatch-Gainey 'gave the country hope in adversity'.<sup>37</sup> They are both famous for defeating the French: Henry at the Battle of Agincourt and Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar, battles that affirmed

Britain's position as a global power. As such, in production there was a sense of reflected glory attached to both figures by their implied association, not least because Nelson occupies a significant role in the collective memory of place as demonstrated by John Winton's account of Portsmouth's response to his death at Trafalgar:

The town had shared the national feelings of joy and relief at the news of the great victory, which removed the threat of a French invasion, with the shock and grief of Nelson's death at the moment of victory. But Nelson had been a part of Portsmouth. He had walked its streets and knew many of its people. Portsmouth had watched his progress, from a young officer to an admiral and a national hero. In Nelson, Portsmouth felt it had lost one of its own.<sup>38</sup>

Today, the on-going legacy of Nelson's association with Portsmouth is apparent in more general markers such as a memorial and the naming of Little Admirals Pre-School and the Admiral Lord Nelson School, alongside his flagship and the shrine to his death in the dockyard. So, Nelson does mean something to the citizens of Portsmouth, if only because he has an unmistakeable presence in the city that has been re-fuelled by the needs of the heritage industry. An example of this reactivation being evident in the re-siting of Nelson's statue to a more prominent location in October 2005 to mark the bicentenary of the Battle of Trafalgar. Blatch-Gainey was keen to trade on this local connection to inspire audience attendance and to make the staging in Victory Arena credible.

### **Performing Heritage and *Henry V***

Alke Gröppel-Wegener suggests that 'Performance in a heritage context can turn an ordinary visit into an immersive experience, where the audience can not only see relevant objects, but become immersed in an environment'.<sup>39</sup> This quality of immersion was evident in Collingwood RSC's *Henry V*. With the smell of salt in the air and the sound and sight of seagulls swooping down as unforeseen scene-stealers, the extraordinary visual field of performance centred on the immediate backdrop of the Solent, the towering physical

presence of HMS Victory and glimpses of the Mary Rose Museum behind it and in which the audience could purchase refreshments during the interval. However, the audience's engagement with naval heritage began long before it was seated.



Image 1: The audience arriving for Collingwood RSC's 2013 production of *Henry V* © Pam Johns

I saw the show on a beautiful summer's evening on Friday 19 July 2013. With the rest of the audience, consisting largely of friends and family of the production team and local residents of Portsmouth, I arrived via Victory Gate, which dates back to 1711 and features a plaque on the right hand wall that marks the visit of Queen Anne in the same year. It acts as a threshold to the largely Georgian dockyard. I was struck by the tight security, the presence of uniformed serving Navy personnel as guides and the long walk past a number of significant buildings and landmarks. The walk past the Police Cell Block built in 1882 for the detention of naval defaulters, the extensive naval storehouses now home to the NMRN and the Admiral Benbow figurehead created in 1813, underscored the impression that the audience was not passively walking past but entering into an environment openly invested in the celebration and preservation of naval heritage. In addition, the location of the performance in Portsmouth, England's pre-eminent naval city since the Tudor age was highly significant. The Navy is integral to the city's topography, economy and identity; it is not a distant entity remote from people's lives in the

city – many people have family, friends, neighbours who are in or work in association with the Navy or Ministry of Defence (MOD) – and support for these organisations is keenly felt.

As Stephen Purcell recognises, in *Henry V*, ‘the Chorus co-opts the audience in a collaborative imaginative project’ in which the theatre company bring forth the fields of battle and the masses of troops required for warfare.<sup>40</sup> In a theatre space this call highlights the theatrical endeavour, the investment in make-believe on which theatre thrives. In this performance, with Navy issue tents and flags borrowed for the occasion, ex- and currently serving personnel in the cast and the contested sea and flagship of one of Britain’s most infamous battles clearly evident, the imaginative investment was not such a leap. Wainwright claimed, ‘the insight serving military personnel can bring *Henry V*, Shakespeare’s most celebrated play about War, is unique’ and, I would agree, whilst it was never made clear which members of the company are serving personnel, just the knowledge that there are some heightened the resonance of the words spoken.<sup>41</sup> Military action in this production was not just an abstract theatrical reference, but understood as a part of real people’s lives and this was part of the production’s affect.<sup>42</sup>

Inevitably, the material presence of the Navy within the production environment circumscribed the approach to the text and the frameworks through which the audience could interpret what they were seeing. *Henry V* is a go-to text at times of war and has proved remarkably politically pliable over the years. It can be used to stir up patriotic fervour as when ‘many US troops were famously issued with copies of *Henry V* during the build up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003’ or to question warfare as when Nicholas Hytner staged the play to debate the advisability, legitimacy and ethics of the same war in 2003.<sup>43</sup> Directors can choose to offer a political commentary on war by focusing on the ethical questions raised by the textual references to threats of extreme force, infanticide, rape, destruction and the suppression of mercy for domestic and foreign opponents, as in the Falklands inflected jingoism Michael Bogdanov’s production summoned in 1986 when Kevin Ewert found soldiers ‘looking gleefully forward to kicking the shit out of people’.<sup>44</sup> However, rather than a vehicle for exploring the ethical ramifications of warfare and its

bloody consequences, narratives of national 'greatness', nation-building, strategic defence of the realm, gallant heroism and magnanimous victory against the odds were writ large in Collingwood RSC's production. Hence, it ran against the grain of most recent theatrical treatments that recognise 'Anti-war sentiments are likely to meet with a more sympathetic response from a twentieth- and twenty-first-century audience than the glorification of war'.<sup>45</sup>

In this production, the vision of a respected leader wedded to public duty, attentive to his position and responsibilities, calling on his fellow kinsman to serve as a 'band of brothers' united in common enterprise made perfect sense. Indeed, any other interpretation is unthinkable given the endorsement and active involvement of the Navy in the context of an environment designed to preserve and celebrate a history of military engagement. In conversation, the producer Johns explained that it was part of the culture of the RNTA to show the Navy in the best possible light: 'we can't put in anything detrimental to the armed forces, the Navy'.<sup>46</sup> As such, the production emphasised the legitimisation of the social order and the 'just war' thesis. There was no sense of bloodlust, rather thoroughly considered and executed military manoeuvres as demonstrated by the careful discussion of strategy emphasised in the production (see image 3). The battle scenes entailed intricately choreographed dramatic sword fights that bore nothing of the bleak, desolate image of medieval battle conjured by William's speech about 'all those legs and arms and heads chopped off it battle' (4.1.124-125). The cast remained resplendent in their Navy whites with not a whiff of decay, blood, mud or exhaustion. This was sanitized battle: necessary, proportionate and cleanly fought.





Image 2: Battle scene in RSC Collingwood's 2013 production of *Henry V* © Pam Johns

Arguably, the insertion of the *real*, alongside specific production choices, closed down any potential ambiguity in the narrative and legitimised a nationalist, pro-military, pro-war reading that evoked a deeply rooted post-imperial nostalgia; what Paul Gilroy refers to as a residue of 'the morbid culture of a once-imperial nation that has not been able to accept its inevitable loss of prestige in a determinedly postcolonial world'.<sup>47</sup>

The production's use of national iconography, principally through the red, white and blue palette in costuming, alongside the prominent Union Jack and Cross of St George flags festooning the British encampments meant that the battle to protect the nation against a foreign *other*, the French, remained central throughout. In an age when the Navy is engaged on multiple fronts in global counter-terrorist operations; disrupting piracy in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean; conducting counter-narcotics patrols off the coast of Africa, rescuing migrants from the Mediterranean Sea and involved in combat operations in the Middle East, I was struck by a marked nostalgia for a simpler bygone era when the enemy was clearly in sight, battle lines were drawn

nation against nation and defence entailed keenly fought land and sea battles.<sup>48</sup>



Image 3: The English encampments in RSC Collingwood's 2013 production of *Henry V* © Pam Johns

During the production, the unavoidable presence of HMS Victory remained significant, especially when the spectacular backdrop became an interactive part of the action when Joe Allan as Henry V delivered the rousing St Crispin's Day speech from high on the decks of Nelson's flagship. In this stunning visual *coup de theatre*, Blatch-Gainey succeeded in making a direct comparison with Nelson's infamous declaration, 'England expects that every man will do his duty' issued to his fleet prior to the Battle of Trafalgar. Allan was very conscious of the weight of history, the power of the heritage site and the visceral impact of this moment for the audience and himself as a performer claiming that 'It gives you goose-bumps'.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, there was a marked frisson at this moment as the audience was compelled to make connections between the time frames of Henry V, Nelson and the present day as overarching narratives of patriotism, camaraderie, blood sacrifice and heroic hegemonic masculinity prevailed across the ages.





Image 4: The St Crispin's Day speech delivered from HMS Victory in Collingwood RSC's *Henry V* © Pam Johns

Whereas Henry returns victorious from Agincourt, the spectre of Nelson's death on board Victory, underscored the fact that battle costs and that men and women do lay down their lives in the service of the nation. So, there was a sense in which this production could insert a pause in the consumption of the Victory as purely a tourist attraction detached from the brutality of war. There were also other means deployed to explicitly connect the heroic narrative and celebration of British courage depicted in *Henry V* with real British warfare and military intervention. The central image and materials

contained in the programme accompanying Collingwood RSC's *Henry V* are interesting in this regard. On the front page there is a collision of various visual signifiers that bring the real and the theatrical; the past and the present; the symbolic and the actual together. A theatrical staging of symbolic objects – a sword, helmet, crown, the Union Jack flag and spilt blood – sits alongside not only the logo for the Portsmouth Historic Dockyard, but the logo for the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Charity, which has a full-page advert at the back of the programme declaiming: 'In the deepest seas, in the most hostile storms, they give everything for their country – what will you give?'<sup>50</sup> In fact, this rhetorical question became literal as nightly collections were held for the charity with members of the cast coming out to rattle buckets to solicit donations. My response to this moment was one of awkward ambivalence. I felt compelled to give, but was very conscious of the fact that I would never normally make a charitable donation to a military-based charity and I was left feeling uncomfortable with the coercive nature of the transaction.

In addition to utilising the specific place of performance, the production also made use of naval ceremonies and cultural heritage to further contribute to the interpretive framework and to underscore the exceptional nature of this performance event. The second half of the production began with the striking of the colours on HMS Victory, a naval ceremony that sees the taking down of the ensigns/flags at sunset, which goes back centuries. Interestingly, this ritual called for the insertion of uniformed serving naval personnel into the overall dramatic action. They were put to work alongside members of Collingwood RSC so that, again, there was an interesting collapse of modes between the dramatic and the real, the historical setting and the contemporary acting out of naval tradition. This aspect of the production underlined the performativity of rituals that sustain Navy culture, but also our role, as audience members, in being granted access to this as part of the spectacle of the heritage environment.

Most notably, the production ended with a stirring rendition of 'Hearts of Oak' the official march of the Navy, whose words were written by the English actor, David Garrick in 1759 and include the following chorus:

Heart of oak are our ships, jolly tars are our men,  
We always are ready, Steady, boys, steady,  
We'll fight and we'll conquer again and again!

It was 'a rousing patriotic conclusion' as noted by Ed Howson in the *Southern Daily Echo*.<sup>51</sup> I normally find overt displays of nationalism and jingoistic rhetoric deeply troubling due to my particular social and cultural frames as a left-wing, republican, predominately, though not exclusively, pacifist. As a result of this positioning I was particularly alert to the seductive appeal of this performance moment and my own ambiguous response to it. 'Hearts of Oak' is a blatant vehicle for the transmission of specific value systems – patriotism, the protection of the nation as *the* dominant priority; the state; the monarchy; empire; the idea of 'just war'; the need to sustain the armed forces in readiness for what unforeseen circumstance might lie ahead and dubious gender politics that erases the radically transformed demographic of the Navy by referring singularly to lads, sons, boys and men. But, this was a powerfully affective performance moment with the entire thirty-strong company united onstage in song. The prior high-octane performance style of battle and declamatory verse stripped bare to the singularity of voice in unison. It was a moment of aesthetic pleasure that stirred an emotional response and generated a sense of felt attachment, with the power of the encounter inextricably tied to the place and immediate field of performance: the sea, Navy personnel and their families performing, the Victory, Mary Rose, the dockyard and Portsmouth.

This production overall and specific instances such as the striking of the colours ceremony and the rendition of 'Heart of Oak' can be illuminated with reference to Smith's notion of intangible heritage, the instances of cultural and social practice that, according to Smith, should also be considered alongside 'authorised heritage discourse'. If, as Smith suggests, 'heritage work' is not just about sites, records and artefacts, but about 'being in place, renewing memories and associations, sharing experiences', then it is clear that this production of *Henry V* offered a potent opportunity for an audience to engage in a process that connected the tangible and intangible heritage of the Navy,

and its legacy, in powerful ways.<sup>52</sup> In this instance there was an interesting duality at play in that the heritage site facilitated a particular reading of *Henry V* and, in turn, the production of *Henry V* imbued the material culture, the 'authorised heritage discourse' of the Navy with a heightened affective appeal. As such, this encounter with heritage opened up a 'way of seeing and feeling' that invited a complex negotiation of the social values it performed.<sup>53</sup> In making tangible the values underpinning empire, warfare and the naval community, the production became a means of asserting and affirming those very values. This is not to suggest that the audience were passive recipients or that these values are impervious to challenge, but that the context of production and reception left little room for alternative or resistant readings. Just as the cultural capital of the RSC and Shakespeare could assert its power and influence within the amateur sector through Open Stages, so, too, the dominant heritage narratives of military conquest, national interest and identity, as well as the associated histories of empire and colonialism, prevailed. So, in many ways this production was instructive for how the 'cultural work' intrinsic to heritage operates as it implicitly and explicitly retrieves, reasserts and performs itself and its underlying value systems.

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<sup>2</sup> See Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Laurajane Smith, 'The 'doing' of heritage', in *Performing Heritage: Research, Practice and Innovation in Museum Theatre and Live Interpretation*, ed. by Anthony Jackson and Jenny Kidd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 80.

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- <sup>4</sup> Smith, 'The 'doing' of heritage', p. 69.
- <sup>5</sup> Alice Mah, *Port Cities and Global Legacies: Urban Identity, Waterfront Work and Radicalism* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2014).
- <sup>6</sup> The Admirals' Players are based at HMS Excellent on Whale Island, Portsmouth; Sultan Theatre Group at HMS Sultan in Gosport and Collingwood RSC at HMS Collingwood in Fareham.
- <sup>7</sup> Programme for Collingwood RSC's production of *Henry V* staged in Portsmouth Historic Dockyard 17-20 July 2013.
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